

2004

# The Art of the Immaculate Conception

Thomas Buffer

Bruce Horner

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Buffer, Thomas and Horner, Bruce (2004) "The Art of the Immaculate Conception," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 55, Article 11.  
Available at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies/vol55/iss1/11](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol55/iss1/11)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

## THE ART OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

*Thomas Buffer, S.T.D., and Bruce Horner, M.F.A.\**

### Introduction

The painter Edouard Manet once said, "Concision in art is a necessity as well as an elegance; a man who is concise makes you think, a verbose man bores you."<sup>1</sup> In this article we aim to give a concise account of how the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and she who was the Immaculate Conception, have been made visible in works of Western art. For this we are completely dependent on the research of others, and do not claim to make any new or original contribution. However, we do wish to draw the reader's attention to how artistic representations of the Immaculate Conception became more concise as the doctrine grew more precise, more defined as the doctrine drew closer to definition. Additionally, we will comment on something not much talked about in previous studies, namely, the concomitant development of doctrine and the deployment of new materials and techniques in painting.

In addition to "concision," three words will sum up and structure our approach to the art of the Immaculate Conception: *challenge, controversy, and change*.

*Challenge.* Nearly every article or book on this topic mentions the difficulty of devising a visual representation of the Immaculate Conception. What exactly is one supposed to draw, sculpt, or paint? The doctrine is not a biblical event or part of an apocryphal narrative. It draws our attention to something

\* Fr. Thomas Buffer, S.T.D., teaches theology at the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio. Bruce Horner, M.F.A., is a painter, printmaker, and stained-glass designer who lives and works in Grove City, Ohio.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Robert Gordon and Andrew Forge, *The Last Flowers of Manet* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986), 30.

that is not there—namely, original sin—directing our gaze to the absence of something invisible to the human eye. That is the obvious challenge, noted by many. There is however a secondary challenge to the artist, less obvious but no less pressing. This secondary challenge was confronted especially by those artists who had to represent the Immaculate Conception during a time when the doctrine was still debatable and even fought over. In this circumstance, the artist had either to imperceptibly insert the notion of immaculacy past his viewers or overtly strive to defend the doctrine in his work, in which case he had to concentrate more on proving a point than on producing a piece of art.

This brings us to our second key word: *Controversy*. The two Marian dogmas solemnly defined by an exercise of the infallible papal magisterium are also two prime examples of the development of Marian doctrine: the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Neither dogma is explicitly stated in the New Testament. Unlike the title “Theotokos,” neither is part of the doctrinal debates of the first four centuries, promoted by the quest for Church unity.

Theological reflection and refinement of the Marian dogmas, by contrast, were largely driven by the desire to accord Mary honor by identifying and celebrating her privileges. Of the two, the Immaculate Conception had a much more winding and bumpy road to travel before finding acceptance and, ultimately, authoritative definition. Along this road, roadblocks were erected from within. Controversy over the Immaculate Conception pitted Catholic against Catholic, both before and after the Protestant Reformation posed its own serious challenge to Marian doctrine and devotion. At times the controversy was so bitter that Rome had to limit discussion, by forbidding use of the phrase “Immaculate Conception” or forbidding one side from condemning the opinion of the other. From today’s perspective, we see these Roman interventions as motivated by the desire to maintain peace within the Church. As far as progress of the doctrine is concerned, they were not roadblocks, but speed bumps.

How did this controversy affect art? During certain periods, those who supported the Immaculate Conception had to

proceed with caution, both in the words they used and in the images they created or commissioned. This meant that it was not always easy to recognize a depiction of the doctrine unless you knew how to read the signs. There would even be a kind of painting called "The Dispute," portraying Mary with authorities who supported her immaculacy. As the pro-immaculacy movement (Immaculatists) gained ground and enjoyed increased papal favor, assertions of Mary's immaculacy in art became both more obvious and easier to read. In sum, there was a change.

*Change.* Those who believed in Mary's Immaculate Conception (the Immaculists) had to find a way to express the fact in an artistic representation. They experimented with a number of possible solutions, based mostly on pre-existent iconographic types or narrative scenes. While they were doing this, something else was happening that has not been the subject of much scholarly comment—namely, a change or evolution in artistic technique, made possible by the emergence of a new medium: oil paint. This article will note both changing strategies and evolving techniques.

### **Early History of Immaculist Art**

In the West, the first glimmerings of the doctrine as well as artistic references to it date from the end of the first Christian millennium, when the liturgical celebration of Mary's Conception, also known as the Conception of Anne, found its way from the East into the West. In fact, all the art examined in this article will be from the West, for it is there that theological speculation and reflection devoted sufficient time to engaging and defining this Marian privilege so that it could ultimately be refined into a doctrinal statement.

At first, images representing the Immaculate Conception were old images recycled. The only thing that made them immaculist was their location. For example, someone illuminating a Book of Hours had to come up with an illustration for December 8, the Conception of Mary. He drew an Annunciation scene, but it looked no different from what others had previously drawn for the feast of the Annunciation. It did refer, indirectly, to the fact that Mary was specially chosen by God. Other recycled Marian images were similarly used in some

kind of immaculist context: Mary as the New Eve, various symbols of Mary's perpetual virginity (such as the burning bush or Gideon's fleece).

The first artistic attempt to refer more directly to Mary's Immaculate Conception was to show Mary triumphing over the Devil, the instigator of the originating sin. An example of such an image—which may be the earliest representation of the Immaculate Conception—is found in a manuscript produced around the first decade of the eleventh century in the Benedictine Monastery of New Minster, Winchester, England [figure 1].

The drawing was made within a community that celebrated Mary's Conception on December 8<sup>th</sup>, as indicated in the same manuscript. It originated, then, in an immaculist context. However, even there, a precise definition of what we now mean by "Immaculate Conception" did not yet exist. The basic theological idea underlying the image is really Mary's predestination. The manuscript applies the following text to Mary (Eccl. 24:14): "Ab initio et ante saecula creata sum, et usque ad futurum saeculum non desinam" (I was created from the beginning and before the ages, and I shall not cease to be in the age to come). She is present in eternity, in the mind of the Trinity. But she has no halo because she is not one of the Divine Persons. Images of the Trinity triumphing over the Arian heresy already existed. But here, both Arius and the devil are defeated. Through the Incarnation of the Son of God, the devil (cause of original sin) is defeated and cast into the mouth of hell (Leviathan). The Son of God triumphed over sin on the cross, which explains the presence of Judas. Judas holds a bent arrow to show that "he was defeated by his own means."<sup>2</sup>

### Later History—Three Temporary Approaches

If we jump ahead four centuries, when the meaning of the phrase "Immaculate Conception" has become much more precise, we again see Mary connected with the defeat of Satan, again in a liturgical manuscript for December 8. The Bedford

<sup>2</sup> Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* ([New York]: Published by the College Art Association of America in conjunction with the *Art Bulletin*, 1957), 20.

Hours, now preserved in the British Museum, illustrate the Office of the Immaculate Conception with Old Testament metaphors. "Mary is shown treading upon the Serpent and piercing it with a cross, while above her the Lord holds a scroll inscribed 'Une fame te casera la teste'" (A woman will crush your head). As in the Winchester manuscript, original sin is represented by its cause. In the Bedford hours, however, it is Mary herself who defeats the devil, as prophesied by the text of Genesis 3:15, which text indirectly confirms Mary's Immaculate Conception.<sup>3</sup> What is still not clearly expressed in the illustration is the absence of original sin in Mary. The main idea remains her role in the plan of salvation, in the triumph over the Devil. As theologians began to develop clearer articulations of Mary's exemption from original sin, artists had to find clearer ways of depicting this privilege. Several different strategies were employed, and before describing the approach that became predominant and even normative, we will first present three approaches that were widely-employed, but eventually abandoned. They are: (1) the embrace at the Golden Gate, (2) the Tree of Jesse, (3) the Santa Aña Triple.

### ***1. Embrace at the Golden Gate***

This is an episode from the story of Mary's parents, first found in the second-century apocryphal work "The Birth of Mary," also known as the "Protoevangelium of James." In the Middle Ages, the story of Joachim and Anne was popularized by the *Golden Legend* of James of Voragine. Joachim and Anne were a wealthy Jewish couple, and would have been called "respectable" except for one thing: after twenty years of marriage, they had no children. For this reason they were considered accursed, and when Joachim went to make an offering in the Temple it was refused. Joachim went off to the country to live in solitude among the shepherds while Anne remained in Jerusalem. One day, an angel appeared separately to Joachim and Anne, announcing to each that the couple would have a child. Joachim rushed back to Jerusalem, and Anne rushed to the city walls to meet him. They met at the Golden Gate and embraced each other with great joy [figure 2].

<sup>3</sup> Levi D'Ancona, *The Iconography*, 23.

What makes images of the embrace at the Golden Gate suited to expressing belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception? The emphasis on divine intervention in bringing about the conception of Joachim and Anne's child. The embrace at the Golden Gate was willed by God, and for that reason the subsequent marital act leading to Mary's conception must have been unstained by concupiscence.

For a time the Church tolerated this image as a means of depicting the Immaculate Conception, until popular misunderstanding led to theological misgiving. Some of the faithful had gotten the idea that the conception of Mary occurred at the moment Joachim and Anne embraced at the Golden Gate. Molanus (1568) witnesses to this: "The idea that she was conceived by a kiss is a fable and the dark imagining of some people . . . It seems to me that they took this occasion for this error from an apocryphal book called the Protoevangelium of St. James."<sup>4</sup> For this reason the image fell into disfavor,<sup>5</sup> finally, in 1677, Innocent XI banned the depiction of the embrace at the Golden Gate.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. *Tree of Jesse*

This image, extremely widespread in the Middle Ages, originated as a way of representing the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Gradually, it was found possible to transform this Christological image into a Mariological one. The pre-existing Jesse Tree image was, as it were, pruned until only a few characters were left, and the image of Mary was enlarged. In this way, the Jesse Tree became more a record of the ancestors of Mary than of Christ's genealogy. When Mary's ancestors are reduced to two, Joachim and Anne (sometimes including an image of this couple embracing at the Golden Gate), the resulting composition may be

<sup>4</sup> Latin original cited in Suzanne Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Witness Pedro de Ojeda (1616): "... this painting of the Immaculate Conception with St. Joachim and St. Anne embracing is no longer in use, and with reason, so that the ignorant not be given occasion to think the Conception of the Virgin consisted of that meeting of her holy parents at the Golden Gate . . ." (cited in Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception*, 39).

<sup>6</sup> Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception*, 28.

seen as an image of the Immaculate Conception. In Spain, where the royal court, following the thought of Raymond Lull, strongly supported the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, "(b)y the sixteenth century all representations of the Tree of Jesse had become genealogical trees of the Virgin."<sup>7</sup> The immaculist reference of a Jesse Tree image may sometimes be inferred from its location. Such is the case, for example, with the sculpted altarpiece of Gil de Siloe and Diego de la Cruz in the Chapel of the Conception of the Cathedral of Burgos [figure 3].

### 3. *Santa Aña Triple*

The *Santa Aña Triple* (German: *Anne Selbdritt*) is a drawing, painting, or statue showing St. Anne, the Virgin Mary, and the child Jesus all together. Originally it was merely an expression of devotion to St. Anne, and did not refer to the Immaculate Conception of Mary. In the Middle Ages, devotion to St. Anne was popular among and promoted by both maculists and immaculists. She was the patron saint of the unborn, of newborn infants, and of pregnant women. By the fifteenth century, especially in Spain, devotion to St. Anne become increasingly focused on the fact that the Virgin Mary had been conceived in her womb.<sup>8</sup> Yet, not every depiction of St. Anne is immaculist. How to tell? An iconographic detail may indicate an immaculist image, as when a *Santa Aña Triple* image is surrounded by other images celebrating the conception and infancy of the Virgin Mary [figure 4].

Sometimes a reference to the Immaculate Conception is indicated by a rosary or the words "Hail Mary." In 1595, Alexander VI gave an indulgence for reciting this variant of the Hail Mary before an image of St. Anne:

Hail, grace be with, the Lord be with you, may your grace be with me, blessed art thou among women and blessed be your holy mother Anna, from whom without spot and without sin you came forth, virgin Mary, and from you moreover was born Jesus Christ, the son of the living God. Amen.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Latin text and this translation provided in Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception*, 29.



Eventually, it became clear that this image did not represent the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception clearly enough, and the strategy was dropped.<sup>10</sup>

### Two Other Strategies

Two other strategies—the “Disputation” and the “Allegory”—illustrate the difficulties artists faced in depicting the doctrine. “Disputation” suggests a picture of a debate. In fact, the debate is not in the picture, but behind it. A painted disputation depicts authorities who support the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, not their opponents. While the artist avoids painting both sides of the debate, he still runs the risk of working so hard to prove his point that he produces propaganda. A good example is the “Disputation of the Immaculate Conception” by Vincenzo di Antonio Frediani (1502), now in the National Museum of the Villa Guinigi, Lucca, Italy. The painting originated in a strongly pro-immaculacy milieu. It was commissioned by Franciscans for a Franciscan church, and is inspired by an Office for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, composed by Bernardine de Bustis<sup>11</sup> after the Franciscan pope Sixtus IV authorized the celebration of the feast in 1476. The painting combines, not altogether successfully, Old Testament biblical typology and the supporting figures of Patriarchs and Doctors whose works were considered to support the privilege of the Immaculate Conception.

The typology is taken from the Book of Esther. In the upper portion of the painting, Christ is portrayed as the King who says to Mary, the Queen, “This law was made for all others, but not for you.” These words are written on a scroll, painted like a banner unfurled next to Christ’s mouth. At the bottom of the painting stand four figures labeled Anselm, Augustine, David, and Solomon. Each carries a banner with a text. In the middle of this group kneels a friar, who is labeled Anthony of Padua, but a document related to the commissioning of this picture has revealed that the kneeling figure is actually meant to be

<sup>10</sup> Stratton, *The Immaculate Conception*, 34.

<sup>11</sup> See the chapter on de Bustis in Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005).

Duns Scotus [figure 5]. Frediani's painting is a great example of how one side of the dispute marshaled its forces to sustain its position, but its value as a painting is, well, disputable. Placing all those text banners presents a terrible problem, and the end-product calls to mind a comic book.

Giorgio Vasari was fully aware of the difficulties Frediani faced. To avoid a clutter of inscriptions and symbols, he chose to paint a so-called "allegory" of the Immaculate Conception in 1541 [figure 6]. The absence of original sin in Mary is indicated by her placement above the fallen Adam and Eve, who are literally entangled in the Tree of their downfall, around which the Serpent twines. The original sinners look up to Mary, who hovers in the sky above them, to express that she, and her immaculacy, were in the mind of God. Because of her predestined part in redemption, she was preserved from original sin. This Allegory has been seen by some as a variant of the Jesse Tree.

### **The Apocalyptic Woman**

In addition to Genesis 3:15, two other scriptural texts inspired depictions of Mary triumphing over Satan—Psalm 90 and Revelations 12, where we find the so-called "Apocalyptic Woman." This image was especially important to the Immaculists. We do not want to say that every depiction of the Apocalyptic Woman represents the Immaculate Conception. We do want to say that the image of the Apocalyptic Woman eventually became the favored way of depicting the Immaculate Conception. It was the basis of a type called "tota pulchra." This designation comes from a passage in the Song of Songs: "Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te" (You are all beautiful, my beloved, and in you there is no stain). The text is associated with the woman of Revelations 12, clothed with the sun, with the crescent moon at her feet [figure 7].

The image of the Apocalyptic Woman merges with an already-existing type, that of Our Lady of Humility [figure 8]. Note the crescent moon at Mary's feet; she is clothed with the sun, represented by an embracing glow, and wears a crown of stars. This image, too, is sometimes surrounded by secondary images to enable us to identify it as immaculist; for example, the embrace at the Golden Gate, the birth of the

Virgin, and other miracle stories from the Golden Legend. In one example, a central image of Our Lady of Humility is accompanied by several side panels, one of which depicts the story of Helsinus, a preacher saved from shipwreck after he promised to tell the Danes to celebrate Mary's Immaculate Conception on December 8.

### The Winner of the Challenge: The Virgin "Tota Pulchra"

This strategy would eventually emerge triumphant and become classic. Around 1500 we see the evolution of a new Marian image: the Virgin, without Child, surrounded by snippets of text, excerpted from Marian litanies. These are titles taken from Old Testament verses that are considered to refer to the Virgin Mary [figure 9]. Mary is shown as a young girl; this element is taken from an earlier tradition in which Mary is shown as a young girl living in the Temple, before she is betrothed to Joseph (the so-called *Abrenkleidjungfrau*) [figure 10].

To make it clear that this image refers to the Immaculate Conception, the artist depends on Marian titles, based on Old Testament texts. The most important text, of course, is from the Song of Songs 4:7, "Tota Pulchra es. . ." The titles or symbols used include heavenly bodies, architectural elements, and plants. The sun and moon recall the Song of Songs 6:10: "Electa ut sol, pulchra ut luna" (Fair as the sun, bright as the moon). The architectural elements depict titles from Marian litanies: Tower of David, City of God (cf. Ps. 86:3). The plants include the Cedar of Lebanon (Eccl. 14:19), the Cypress on the heights of Hermon, the Palm tree in Engedi, and the rose garden in Jericho. These landscape elements will be very useful to painters who need a setting in which to place the figure of the Virgin. Artists will sometimes include the *speculum sine macula* or "spotless mirror" of Wisdom 7:26. The symbolism of the spotless mirror meshes with the words "tota pulchra es. . .": because Mary is without the spot or stain of original sin, she perfectly reflects the holiness of God.

Sometimes the image of the Apocalyptic Woman *tota pulchra*, in addition to the text and symbols described above, is placed between Sts. Joachim and Anne to make it clear that the Immaculate Conception is being referred to. The so-called

*Immaculate Conception of Sot de Ferrer* by Joan de Joanes is a good example of this approach, which became characteristic of Spanish paintings [figure 11].

Note also the symbols of Mary's spiritual privileges. Mary stands amid the clouds, indicating a heavenly environment. She is in the mind of God the Father. She is young. Her hands are joined in prayer. As the woman of Revelations 12, she is crowned with twelve stars, clothed with the sun, and stands on the crescent moon, but she is also *pulchra ut luna* (Song of Songs). The words God the Father speaks to her are also from the Song of Songs (4:7): "Tota pulchra es amica mea et macula non est in te."

Someone taking a quick glance at this work, seeing Mary apparently floating in the sky, might take it for a picture of the Assumption. But there is the presence of Joachim and Anne, and the fact that Mary is traveling downward rather than upward. This refers to the idea of predestination: from the beginning of the world God had a plan to restore what was ruined by Eve's sin. The symbols scattered about are also symbols of the Immaculate Conception, as already mentioned.

The Spanish painter, sculptor, and art censor to the Inquisition, Francesco Pacheco (1564-1644), in his *El Arte de la Pintura* (published posthumously in 1649), standardized this type of the Apocalyptic Woman *tota pulchra*. His formula would govern the work of Spanish painters, including his pupil and son-in-law Velazquez, Murillo, El Greco, et al. In stipulating his formula, Pacheco also gives a justification for it: She is indeed all beautiful, in fact, she was "the most beautiful creature God made. And thus, the words of the Holy Spirit, which are always applied to this painting: *Tota pulchra es Amica mea*."<sup>12</sup> Pacheco further prescribes that the Virgin should be painted dressed in a white tunic with blue mantle, as she appeared to the Portuguese woman Beatriz de Silva. Like the Apocalyptic Woman, she is

<sup>12</sup> F. Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura: Edición del manuscrito original, acabado el 24 de enero de 1638* (Preliminar, notas e índices de F. J. Sanchez Canton; 2 vols.; Madrid: Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan, 1956), 2:210-211, "... la criatura más bella que Dios crió. Y, así, la alaba el Espíritu Santo, cuya letra se aplica siempre a esta pintura: *Tota pulchra es Amica mea*."

"clothed with the sun," an oval of light that surrounds her body, and is crowned with twelve stars. The moon under her feet is either a whole globe or a crescent, and, if it is a crescent, the points should face downward. She is young, a maid of twelve or thirteen years, and since she is unmarried her long hair hangs down over her shoulders. Pacheco presumes that attributes such as the symbols described above will be present, and he recommends that these be carried by seraphim and angels.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of this article we wrote of concision, challenge, controversy, and change. Having described the type of image that was deemed to have best met the challenge, we now turn to controversy and change—change that will lead to concision.

In 1661, supporters of the Immaculate Conception rejoiced when, on December 8 of that year, Alexander XII issued the bull *Sollicitudo omnium ecclesiarum*, lifting the ban on speaking in favor of Mary's Immaculate Conception. From then on, the Holy See officially favored the belief, its cult and liturgical celebration. As a consequence, paintings of the Immaculate Conception quickly changed. Code language and strong defenses of the doctrine were no longer necessary, and paintings become less cluttered.

This shift may be seen by comparing two paintings of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception by Zurbarán. In a version prior to 1661, he employed the usual *Tota Pulchra* scheme, placing the Virgin in a landscape, surrounded by the symbols of her litanies [figure 12]. In a version dated 1661, the year of *Sollicitudo*, the artist no longer has need of the litany symbols, nor does he need a naturalistic landscape in which to situate them [figure 13]. Mary is now "free to float in the heavens as a self-explanatory image of her own purity."<sup>14</sup> The astronomical elements are retained: the crescent moon, the crown of stars, and the fact that Mary is clothed with the sun (expressed by gold-colored "atmosphere"). Even greater concision is now possible, as exemplified by Murillo's Virgin of the Immaculate

<sup>13</sup> Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura*, 2:211-212.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Brown, *Francisco de Zurbarán*, 152, cited in Stratton, *Immaculate Conception*, 105.

Conception with the Crescent Moon, in which the symbols of the young girl and prayer and the crescent moon suffice to indicate the meaning of the picture [figure 14].

### **Summary: Development in Both Message and Medium**

In this case, the medium is not the message, but as the message evolved, so did the medium. Once the message was declared immaculate, unstained by the suspicion of theological error, the medium could be itself. Set free from the burden of proving a point, artists scrubbed away the spots and blots of propaganda, and were free to make really good paintings. Controversy and change gave way to convention, which led to concision, which produced better paintings.

But something else had been going on along with change in the acceptance of the doctrine that would allow for better and more concise paintings; a new material and new technique were now available to painters. What made this possible was the introduction of oil paint.

Oil paint, more accurately the paint using slow drying oils, often combined with resins and other spirits, would have been a dream to painters in the centuries before its development. It is firstly the paint of flesh, of the surfaces of human, animal, and vegetable, of moisture, atmosphere, and, of course, light. Oil paint allows a facility of change in composition, quick removal and addition of areas of paint, the glazing over of and blurring between passages that would have been a joy to any practitioner using it for the first time. To the painter of Christian themes, it was a most apt resource. The distinctive doctrine of Christianity is the incarnation, and incarnation means embodiment. The painter of Christian themes has to depict bodies, but the depiction of believable bodies in two dimensions demands the illusion of a believable, three-dimensional space. The atmospheric effects made possible and easy by oils allow the creation of spaces around and behind the human figure. When air surrounds the figure, the (back)ground can be simple and airy. By contrast, medieval artists working with the materials available to them (that is, without oils), would create space by use of simple perspective, placing elements before or

behind each other, or by creating flatter, more decorative surfaces, in the Moorish tradition.

As we have seen, the acceptance of the Immaculate Conception allowed artists to eliminate superfluous architectural elements, attributes, and text balloons. Acceptance of the doctrine meant that such elements were no longer needed to prove a point, at the same time that oil paint eliminated the need to insert such elements to create the appearance of believable, three-dimensional space. Similarly, oil painting made it possible to paint a realistic person, at the same time that doctrinal and devotional developments focused the believer's attention on Mary as a person.

Our rapid review of the art of the Immaculate Conception confirms the admonition of Monet, in a backwards way. We have seen that bad paintings illustrate the development of the doctrine and the strategies for translating it into a visual type better than good paintings do. The good painters have convention on their side. One cannot unify an image if one has too much going on in it. Once the controversy ends, what happens? The artist can concentrate on making a good painting. This suggests a word of advice to present-day religious painters: one who wishes to "point" to Mary by painting her, would do well to be concise.



1. *Virgin Present at Defeat of Devil*. English, ca. 1010-1020. Cotton ms. London, British Museum.



*The Art of the Immaculate Conception*

199



2. Giotto, *The Meeting at the Golden Gate*, ca. 1303-1305. Fresco (detail). Padua, Scrovegni Chapel.



3. Gil de Siloe and Diego de la Cruz, *Tree of Jesse*. Chapel of the Conception, Cathedral of Burgos (Arxiu Mas).



4. Masters of Hugo Jansz. van Woerden, *Anna selbdritt*, with St. Joseph and St. Joachim. Illum. ms. The Hague.



5. Follower of Ghirlandaio, *Virgin as Esther*. Lucca, Pinacoteca.



6. Giorgio Vasari, *Allegory of the Immaculate Conception*, 1541. Oil on wood. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.



7. *Virgin Immaculate with Apocalyptic Symbols*. Flemish, 13th century. Rothschild Canticles, fol. 63v (from Quaritch Catalogue).

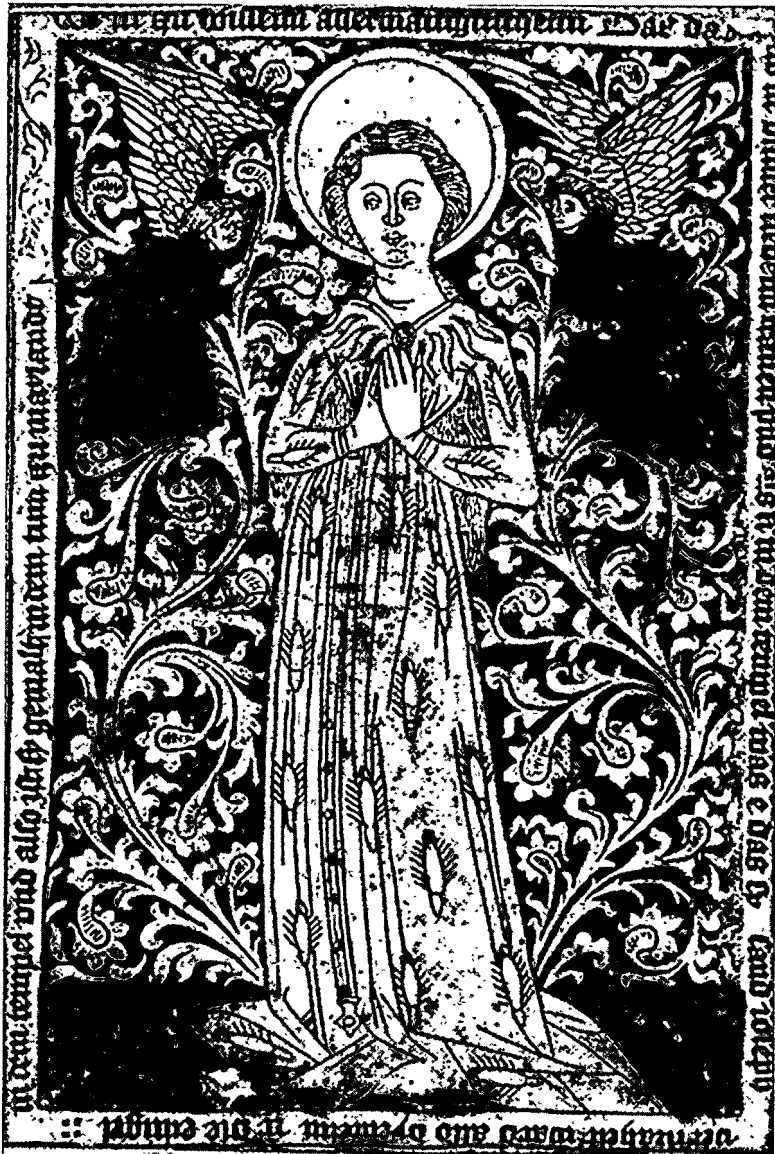


8. Lippo di Dalmasio, *The Madonna of Humility*, 1390-1400. London, National Gallery.

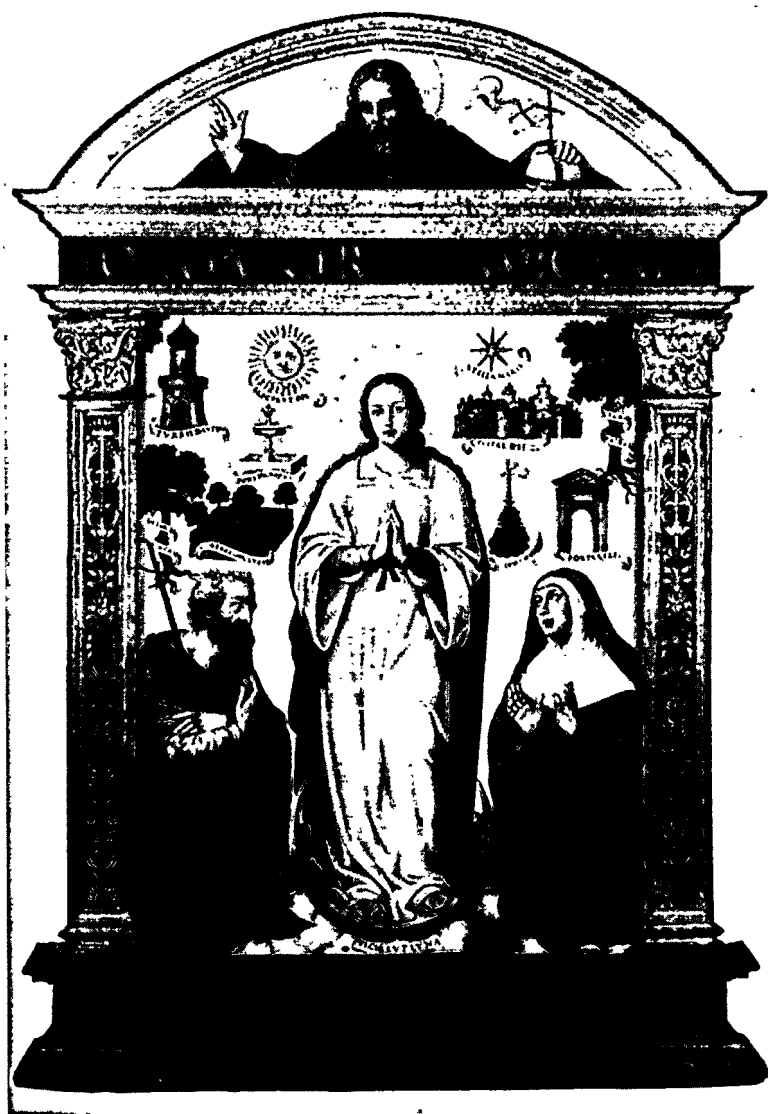


9. Unknown artist, *The Virgin "Tota Pulchra,"* ca.1500. Frontispiece of *Heures de la Vierge à l'usage de Rome*, published by Thielman Kerver, ca.1500. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional.





10. Unknown German artist, *Maria im Ährenkleid*, ca.1450-60. Woodcut. Munich, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung.



11. Joan de Joanes, *The Virgin "Tota Pulchra."* Sot de Ferrer, Castellón, parish church (Arxiu Mas).

*The Art of the Immaculate Conception*

209



12. Francisco Zurbarán, *La Inmaculada Concepción*, 1630-35. Madrid, Prado.



13. Francisco Zurbarán, *La Inmaculada Concepción*, 1661. Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum.

*The Art of the Immaculate Conception*

211



14. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception with the Crescent Moon*, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Madrid, Museo del Prado.